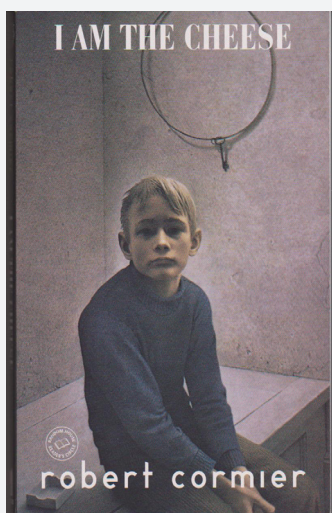


First Opinion: Still the Most Frightening of All: Robert Cormier's *I Am the Cheese*

Cormier, Robert. *I Am the Cheese*. 1977.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf-Random House, 2007.

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Many of us may remember the first time we watched a scary movie and the restless night (or nights) that followed. These movies frightened us in many ways: the build-up of excruciating suspense, the utter hopelessness that evil was going to brutally triumph over innocence, the sudden, sharp bloody image. But when we view these films again, do they disturb us to the same degree? Is *Jaws* still frightening to viewers who now can witness gore like never before? Is Freddie still a threat to our dreams?

This viewed horror can penetrate the psyche, can punish one's sense of comfort and security, but because it is experienced at one remove (such is the medium of film) and not lived, it can be more easily resisted, laughed at, consumed as entertainment. Turn the TV off and the fear subsides. Yet, novels, such as Robert Cormier's *I Am the Cheese* get under the skin, supplant equilibrium with dissonance, rupture the notion of a unitary self. There is no evil, but there is also no innocence. You can't turn the channel. The novel that Margaret Parish in her 1978 *English Journal* column declared the "[m]ost frightening of all" YA novels to appear that year retains its power to unnerve in 2014 (83).

As an engaged reader, as you ride with 14-year-old Adam (previously known as Paul Delmonte) on the 75-mile journey to visit his father in Rutterburg, Vermont, you are immersed

in the bike ride, the people Adam encounters as he stops along the way, the dangers he confronts and imagines. As you sit with Adam in a closed room as Brint interrogates him, pushes him—shoves him—toward discomforting revelations, you sit beside him, on edge, claustrophobic, wary of this man and his probing, personal questions. As you continue the ride with Adam toward uncertainty, as you continue to endure the inquisition, disturbed by every new recognition, you start to feel the ground shake and then slide away underneath you. Then, when you realize you as reader are actively undermining your stability—you are agent to this psychological re/action—you are free falling. As your subject position aligns with the narrator (or narrators if you distinguish between Adam the road-tripper and Adam under Brint's relentless questioning), fissures appear, self becomes fragments, unmoored to anything, and by the end of the novel the only certainty is that you and Adam can go through the same process of dissolution again and again, never whole, never null. This is horror. This is horror, inside out.

In *I Am the Cheese* the horror for Adam and the reader comes in waves, one after another after another after another:

The horror of being bullied.

The horror of being pushed off a bike into a ditch.

The horror of being utterly alone, without parents or friends.

The horror of not remembering, of remembering.

The horror of never arriving.

The horror of one hill followed by another hill.

The horror of leaving behind an only friend, of being left behind.

The horror of hunger.

The horror of needing help, of helplessness.

The horror of loving someone, of losing everyone.

The horror of intimacy, of innocence, of loss.

The horror of never knowing what is true, what is real.

The horror of a wrong number.

The horror of being no one, nothing, of not knowing anyone.

The horror of loss of free will.

The horror of institutionalization.

The horror overwhelms in the visceral force of literal and symbolic details: "I am driving into the storm" (65). "I watch the map dissolving" (65). "I shrivel into myself, hugging myself, cold and damp and miserable" (66).

In the end, the horror for the reader comes in not knowing for certain what is real, the interviews or the bike ride? Was the Delmonte family ward of the Witness Protection Program? Were his parents killed because of what his father, an investigative journalist, uncovered? Or is the Delmonte backstory a product of Adam/Paul's imagination? Does Brint want to help

or hurt Adam/Paul? Is Adam/Paul institutionalized so that he can be cured or so that he can disclose what his father knew and had told him?

Even in the age of computer-generated images, what movie could compete with the nuance of *I Am the Cheese*? Margaret Parish thought Cormier's novel was perhaps the most frightening of all the novels she reviewed in her 1978 column. I argue it is one of the most frightening YA novels of all time. After reading it, that's one of the few things I am certain about.

Works Cited

Cormier, Robert. 1977. *I Am the Cheese*. New York: Ember, 2011.

Parish, Margaret. "Pick of the Paperbacks: Peril, Paranoia, Future Fright and Other Alarms and Diversions." *English Journal* 67.9 (1978): 82–84.

About the Author

Crag Hill is an assistant professor of English education at the University of Oklahoma. His research interests include critical theory around comics and young adult literature, multimodal composition, and classroom discourse. He recently edited *The Critical Merits of Young Adult Literature: Coming of Age*, a collection of essays demonstrating that contemporary young adult literature can hold up to sustained critical attention.